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A HISTORY

OF

THE BEGAMS OF BENGAL

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Begams of Bengal

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Translated from the Bengali

OF

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FOREWORD.

(AKSHOY KUMAR MAITRA, B. L.)

This foreword is intended only to acknowledge the undeniable fact that the Begams of Bengal had a legitimate place in the history of the Nawabs. They lived in seclusion, but they exerted a salutory influence upon the Nawabs and also upon their darbar. Some of the Begams were remarkable for uncommon prudence and sagacity, some reflected great credit upon their sex and high station in life by their magnanimity, benevolence and other amiable qualities. The history of the Begams of Bengal will, therefore, be found interesting and instructive to all, while it will place before students of history all that is worth-knowing about the Begams in a collected form. The publication must be congratulated upon its lucid exposition and a scrupulous regard for historical accuracy.

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PREFACE

No systematic history of the Begams of Bengal has yet been published. We have, in this booklet, attempted to collate the scattered materials of the lives of some of the Begams Although the life-sketches of the Begams of Murshidabad have been dilated in this booklet, we may assume to call them Begams of Bengal, for the history of Murshidabad during the 18th century is properly speaking the history of Bengal.

We desire to express our heartfelt gratitude to Prof. Jadunath Sarkar, M. A., Premchand Roychand Scholar, of the Patna College, who in spite of his multifarious duties, has kindly gone through the Ms. twice and helped us with many useful suggestions.

Babu Akshoy Kumar Maitra, B. L., the well-known antiquarian, is also deserving of our gratitude for having graced this booklet with a foreword.

S. C. BARMAN.
B. N. BANERJI.

Calcutta, July, 1915.

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THE BEGAMS OF BENGAL

ZINAT-UN-NISSA

DAUGHTER OF MURSHID QULI KHAN)

Zinat-un-nissa was the only daughter of Murshid Quli Khan, the Nawab of Bengal. She was married to Shuja Khan during the incumbency of Murshid Quli as Diwan of Hyderabad. Shuja was a native of Burhanpur, a city in the Deccan, and by origin a Turk of the Afshar clan.* He married Zinat-un-nissa and became one of Murshid Quli's family. This union immensely benefited him, because his father-in-law, shortly after his own appointment as Diwan of Bengal, conferred on him the Deputy Subadarship of Orissa, but before long he fell out with Murshid Quli by differing in opinion with him regarding the mode of administration of the province, and refusing to

* The *Masir-ul-umra*, iii. 753, states that Shuja

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submit to his constant interference in matters of government. In consequence of this difference, Shuja left his father-in-law and installed himself in Orissa in order to inspect personally the affairs of government.

Shuja was a just and upright governor, always kind and loving to his people, but the only weakness in his character was his luxury and voluptuousness. Zinat-un-nissa, who was of a virtuous disposition, tried her best to reclaim her husband, but was not successful. This, added to his attitude towards her father, brought about a rupture with her husband. She left Shuja and repaired with her son Sar-faraz to Murshidabad.

Shuja had a faithful servant in Mirza Muhammad, a distant relation. Originally Mirza Muhammad was very poor and had come to Orissa as an adventurer to try his fortune. He had two sons Haji Ahmad and Aliwardi. Aliwardi soon attracted the Nawab's attention by his indomitable courage and extraordinary cleverness. He gradually worked his way up and shortly after found

originally bore the name of Mirza Dakhiny, and was the son of Nur-ud-din, who was descended from Ali Yar Sultan a governor of Farah, under the Persian king Shah Tamasp.

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himself in a position to call in his brother Haji from Delhi to Orissa. Both the brothers had considerable experience in matters of war and administration, and exerted themselves in firmly establishing Shuja on the masnad of Orissa. Aliwardi soon obtained the highest post in Shuja's durbar.

At this time Murshid Quli, who was ill, feeling the approach of death, expressed his intention to raise Sar-faraz, his grandson, to the Nizamat of Bengal. Shuja being apprised of the fact took Aliwardi and Haji's counsel and applied to the Emperor of Delhi for the Nizamat of Bengal and Orissa. Within a short time Murshid Quli died. Shuja was then already on his way to Murshidabad. He received the Sanad from Delhi and made a martial entry into the city, the then capital of Bengal, and ascended the masnad. 1725-39

Zinat-un-nissa was then living with her son in the vicinity of Murshidabad. Sar-faraz received intelligence of the approach of Shuja Khan, and made preparations to oppose him, but his mother, Zinat-un-nissa, a woman remarkable for her prudence and sagacity, and one for whom he entertained great affection and respect, interposed.

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She represented to him that his father being an old man, could not long keep him out of the government, and advised him to be satisfied, for the present, with the post of Diwan of Bengal; and not to be guilty of the horrid impiety of appearing in arms against his father. These arguments prevailed so entirely over his resentment that he went out to meet his father and conducted him to Murshidabad. Shuja paid her a visit and expressed his regret for the wrong he had done her. Zinat-un-nissa forgave her husband.

At this time the government of Azimabad (Patna) fell into his hands. Shuja wanted to appoint one of his two sons to the governorship of the province, but could not decide on which of them to bestow it. Zinat-un-nissa refused to send her son to Patna: at the same time, being jealous of her co-wife's son Taqi Khan,* opposed his appointment. Shuja could not go against his wife's wishes and had at last to send Aliwardi to Patna as its Governor. Zinat-un-nissa expressed her approval of this appointment by

* Mr. Holwell is of opinion that Taqi Khan was Zinat-un-nissa's son and not her co-wife's. But the *Mutaqherin* is a higher authority.

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bestowing costly apparels on Aliwardi. She seems to have insisted on her husband recognising her as the real heiress to the government and considered her husband rather as the viceroy-consort than viceroy in his own right.

When Nadir Shah was thundering at the gates of Delhi, Shuja Khan, was on his death-bed. After his death, Sar-faraz succeeded him. 1739-41
By this time Aliwardi and his family had attained a considerable degree of influence and importance in the State, which did not fail to create a host of enemies in Sar-faraz's court, who continually poisoned Sar-faraz's mind against Mirza Muhammad, Aliwardi and Haji Ahmad. The result was that before long Haji Ahmad was deprived of the diwanship. Having been thus disgraced, Haji wrote a letter to his brother Aliwardi at Patna seeking redress. Thereupon, Aliwardi with his soldiers marched on Murshidabad, defeated and killed Sar-faraz at the sanguinary battle of Giriah. Two days Jan. 1741
after, Aliwardi entered Murshidabad with great pomp. Before he sat on the masnad, he had personally gone up to Zinat-un-nissa's apartments and bowing down his head before her, asked her

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pardon and said, "What fate ordained has happened. The perfidy of this slave will for ever remain a blot on the pages of history, but I swear by heaven, that I shall never falter in paying my respects to you as long as I shall live. I hope that time will efface from your mind the sin that this humble and penitent slave has committed."

Zinat-un-nissa, overwhelmed with sorrow at the loss of her son, made no reply.

On Aliwardi's accession to the masnad, his elder son-in-law, Nawazish Muhammad, having obtained Zinat-un-nissa's consent, brought her to his palace, and adopted her as mother. She was entrusted with the entire management of his seraglio, but she never appeared in person before Nawazish and whenever she had to render him an account of the expenses on his family, she used to do so from behind a curtain. All her orders in respect of the seraglio were executed without reference to him.

Zinat-un-nissa kept to herself the demesne lands of Murshid Quli, her father, and enjoyed their rent freely. She was respected by Nawazish and his father-in-law Aliwardi, and they never approached her without a profound bow, nor

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offered to sit in her presence without her command.

Nawazish and his wife Ghasiti both tried their utmost to soothe her grief. Zinat-un-nissa adopted her grandson Aga Baba, who became the consolation of her old age. She proposed to marry him to one of the daughters of Saiyyad Ahmad Khan and sent him a message through Ghasiti. The prince gave his consent and the marriage ceremony took place at Murshidabad. *

History does not tell us how long she lived, but the remains of a masjid, she erected at Azimnagar, on a site half a mile off from the palace, still exist, and in its vicinity, it is said, the lady was buried.

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* *Mutaqherin*, Vol. I, P. 340 ; Vol. II, P. 109.

In the *Mutaqherin* Zinat-un-nissa appears to have another name Nafisa, but the *Riyaz-us-salatin* (P. 320 & 322) and Scott's *Ferishta* (Vol. II. 319) say that Nafisa Begam was Sar-faraz's sister, and not mother. But as the *Mutaqherin* is a reliable authority, we prefer its statement.

ALIWARDI'S BEGAM

(GRANDMOTHER OF SIRAJ-UD-DAULAH)

Haji Ahmad, Nawab Aliwardi's eldest brother, had three sons, Nawazish, Saiyyad Ahmad and Zainuddin Ahmad to whom the three daughters of Aliwardi, viz., Ghasiti, Maimana and Amina, were respectively married. Nawazish had no issue ; Saiyyad had only one son, Shawkat Jang ; and Zainuddin had three, Siraj, Fazl Quli and Mirza Mahdi.

Many incidents of Nawab Aliwardi's rule are closely connected with his Begam. She followed him like his shadow. The following events will corroborate this statement.

Mir Habib, the arch-traitor, told Raghuji Bhonsla, the Mahratta chief, of the riches of Bengal which excited his cupidity to such a degree that he at once sent a big force under the leadership of Bhaskar Pandit to invade the country. The traitor acted as a guide. Aliwardi met the

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Mahrattas near Burdwan. His Begam accompanied him to the battle-field. The Mahrattas continued their depredations and even laid their hands on 'Landa' the very elephant on which the Begam was riding, and were leading it away to their camp, when Musahib Khan rescued the Begam and the elephant.

At the battle of Balasore, the Begam was also with the Nawab. She, who could with the placidity of a veteran, witness battle-field and its blood-curdling scenes, who could retain her courage even when surrounded and captured by enemies, and who never failed to stand by her husband in his deadly perils, was undoubtedly a jewel of her sex. She imparted joy to festivities, but was modest in her home life—a skilful nurse in sickness—a sound counsellor in adversity. Aliwardi used to pay the tenderest regard to her wishes, and she became the prime-mover of all the good deeds done by her husband. Whenever opportunity occurred, she never failed to respond to the call of humanity, and always helped to confer great benefit on her husband's subjects. Mr. Holwell speaks highly of her, when he describes her as "a woman whose wisdom, magnanimity,

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benevolence, and every amiable quality, reflected high honor on her sex and station; she much influenced the Usurper's councils, and was ever consulted by him in every material movement in the state, except when sanguinary and treacherous measures were judged necessary, which he knew she would oppose as she ever condemned them, when perpetrated, however successful,—predicting always that such politics would end in the ruin of his family."*

After the murder of Bhaskar Pandit, Raghuji invaded Bengal with a vast army. The Nawab was sorely troubled and frightened. He sought the Begam's advice, who counselled him to negotiate peace with the Mahrattas. Raghuji also was not at ease of mind and was eager for peace, but Mir Habib, the Nawab's implacable enemy, thwarted Raghuji's intention and told him, that if the war was carried on for some time, Aliwardi would be compelled to sue for peace, as his treasury was exhausted, and his soldiers were disaffected owing to the irregular payment of

* Holwell's *Interesting Historical Events*. Pt. I, Chap. II, P. 170-71.

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their salaries. Raghuji was thus instigated by Mir Habib to reject the Nawab's proposal. The Begam heard of this, and at once ordered the soldiers to attack the Mahratta camp.

At this stage, the Afghan chiefs caused the Nawab endless troubles by their intrigue with the Mahrattas. However, they were detected and dismissed with disgrace. They retaliated by compassing Zainuddin's death and imprisoning his wife Amina Begam.

Aliwardi was nonplussed at this unexpected danger, but the Begam encouraged him to take the field against the Afghan chiefs. A battle followed, Amina was rescued and the Afghan chiefs were subdued.

The Begam came to know of an illegal attachment between Husain Quli and her two daughters, Ghasiti and Amina. She tried her best to lead them back from the path of vice, and to separate Husain Quli from them. She failed in her attempt, and considering Husain Quli as the root of the evil, incited Siraj to put him to death. Thereupon Husain Quli was murdered.

Soon after this Nawazish died. The riches, which now devolved on Ghasiti, drew Siraj's 17 Decr. 1755.

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attention. Ghasiti took refuge in the Motijheel with all her wealth. As long as Aliwardi lived, Siraj could not vent his enmity on Ghasiti. In 1756 Aliwardi died, and Siraj ascended the masnad and surrounded the Motijheel with a view to secure Ghasiti's wealth. Aliwardi's Begam herself entered the fortress and brought about a reconciliation between Siraj and Ghasiti. Ghasiti had, however, to give up all claim to the masnad of Bengal for her adopted son and to recognize Siraj as the Nawab. On the other hand, Siraj agreed not to lay his hands on her aunt's property. But next day he forcibly took possession of all the wealth in the Motijheel. For all these reasons Ghasiti, becoming utterly helpless, sought an asylum with the English. This resulted in a quarrel between Siraj and the English. The former attacked Calcutta and took Holwell to
7 July, 1756. Murshidabad as a prisoner. One day, when a close prisoner at Murshidabad, Holwell overheard the conversation of the Begam's maid-servant with her Shaikh and came to know that Aliwardi's Begam had solicited Siraj for his release, and the next day he, to his astonishment, found himself at liberty. Mr. Holwell has not forgot

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to express his gratitude towards this benevolent lady.

After Siraj was murdered, Miran sent Aliwardi's Begam, Ghasiti, Amina, Lutf-un-nissa and her little daughter to Dacca as prisoners, and passed an order on the Governor of the place to execute them secretly, but the latter declined to carry out such a barbarous and inhuman order. Whereupon Miran deputed a friend of his to do his bidding. We shall describe later on how Ghasiti and Amina met with their fate. We do not find in history how Aliwardi's Begam, Lutf-un-nissa and her daughter escaped the fate which overtook Ghasiti and Amina, and came back to Murshidabad.

The last days of the Begam were as dark as the beginning of her life was bright, and even now visitors of her tomb cannot refrain from shedding tears on the grave of this great lady.

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GHASITI BEGAM

(AUNT OF SIRAJ-UD-DAULAH.)

Ghasiti Begam was Aliwardi's eldest daughter and was closely related to Siraj. With her life are closely connected some of the incidents of the disagreement between the East India Company and Nawab Siraj-ud-daulah, which ultimately resulted in the battle of Plassey, the fall of the Nawab, and the foundation of the British Empire in India. So, the life of Ghasiti is of no mean importance so far as the history of Bengal is concerned.

She was married to Nawazish Muhammad, Aliwardi's nephew. Nawazish was appointed Governor of Dacca by Nawab Aliwardi. In his youth, he was of a capricious nature; but his

* Ghasiti was originally called Mihr-un-nissa. We find her so named in the *Mutaqherin*. She had several other names too. She was ordinarily known as Ghasiti Begam, Ghasiti Bibi or Chhuta Begam. Sometimes she has been described as the Begam of Motijheel, which was mainly due to her residence in the Motijheel castle.

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generosity and philanthropy won for him the heartfelt love of the people. Having vast riches at his command, he never yearned for the throne. He adopted as his son Fazl Quli, Siraj's brother, who became the only stay of his life.

In 1747 Siraj's father Zainuddin was killed by the Afghans. At this time Aliwardi's eldest brother Haji Ahmad died. In 1752 Aliwardi declared Siraj, his grandson, his heir-apparent in preference to his nephews. Fazl Quli died at an early age and shortly after, in 1755, his adoptive father Nawazish too died.

Ghasiti had many virtues, but a woman's frailty too. During the life-time of her husband, she fell in love with Husain Quli, a favourite of her husband, and had many a quarrel with her consort over her gallant. Through her influence, Husain Quli became an important personage in the State. But Husain Quli gradually drifted away from Ghasiti and came to love Amina, and thus made her an enemy. Siraj at this time came to know of the disgraceful conduct of his aunt and his mother, and asked Aliwardi to murder Husain Quli, but could do nothing without Nawazish's permission. Ghasiti found this a splendid oppor-

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tunity to wreak her vengeance on her faithless lover. She joined her mother in persuading Nawazish to give his consent, and Husain Quli was brutally murdered. His lamentable death frightened Siraj's uncle Saiyyad Ahmad, who took refuge in Poorneah, but shortly after his arrival there, he too died.

Now Siraj had only two opponents to remove from the path of his ambition. First, Ghasiti, who after the death of her husband, adopted Fazl Quli's little son Murad, and centred all her love on this child. She declared him the sole heir to her husband's wealth and did her best to secure for him the masnad of Bengal. The second aspirant to the throne, was Saiyyad Ahmad's son, Shawkat Jang, Governor of Poorneah.

The administration was practically in the hands of Siraj for some time before Aliwardi's death. Nawazish was his avowed enemy, and to satisfy his old grudge, Siraj was on the look-out for a plea to quarrel with his widow. The only object he had in view, was to escheat all the property she had. He soon came to learn that one Mir Nazir Ali, an officer of the State, was a particular favourite of the Begam, and made up his mind to

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make a capital use of this piece of news. He at once wrote to the Begam that a rumour was afloat that Mir Nazir Ali was in the habit of paying secret visits to the Begam's bower, and that though the rumour had not a shadow of truth, it was a direct blow to her honour and a matter of disgrace for the Nawab's family. He further suggested that to stifle the rumour in its infancy, she should forthwith send him the severed head of the villain. Ghasity received the letter, but paid no heed to it. The quarrel that was in embers, now blazed forth. The old Nawab Aliwardi was still alive. He spared no pains to put it out, but failed.

Ghasiti was much frightened, and with Raj Ballav, Mir Nazir and several other faithful servants, took shelter in the Motijheel castle. Further, to secure her own safety, she, with an army of 20,000 men, entrenched herself there and took care to be well supplied with arms and ammunitions. She was assisted in making these preparations by Raja Raj Ballav of Dacca, the faithful Diwan of her deceased husband.

After Nawazish's death, Siraj imprisoned Raj Ballav, and cruelly tortured him to disclose the hiding place of the Begam's vast wealth, but Raj

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Ballav never deviated from the path of duty. For some time he was kept under strict surveillance, but was released at Ghasiti's entreaties. Raj Ballav never forgot this, and never expecting forgiveness from Siraj when he would come to the masnad, he joined heart and soul with Ghasiti in a conspiracy against Siraj.

As the Nawab's health was gradually sinking, Raj Ballav thought it expedient to secure the safety of his family and property. Accordingly he wrote a letter to Mr. Watts, the officer in-charge of the Cossimbazar Factory, that his family, on their way to Puri, would stop at Calcutta and stay there for some time.

Raj Ballav was a resident of Dacca. He was a man of vast influence, and the English having a trade centre at Dacca were naturally tempted to gratify him for the sake of their trade. Moreover, Siraj was their enemy and Ghasiti was conspiring to thwart his design of succession to the masnad, and if she succeeded in her attempt, it would be of great help to the English, and as Raj Ballav was Ghasiti's diwan, the English at once assented to Raj Ballav's proposal, and his family, on arrival at Calcutta, was accorded a safe asylum.

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Siraj had another opponent in Shawkat Jang. From the day on which Aliwardi declared Siraj his successor, Shawkat Jang was burning with jealousy. As a matter of course, he joined Ghasiti against Siraj. In 1756 Aliwardi died. Siraj at once proclaimed himself his successor throughout the country and next day attacked and surrounded Motijheel so completely, that no one from outside could find ingress into the fort. Although the castle was strong in structure and advantageously situated, being in the middle of a large lake, communicating with the land by a narrow strip of ground, Ghasiti could not hold out for more than three days. She expected help from the Nawab of Poorneah, but not obtaining any, was bewildered and could not even inform Shawkat Jang of the siege. In the meantime the supply of food fell short; the besieged soldiers lost heart and on the third night evacuated the fortress and took to their heels. Aliwardi's Begam at this time came to the fort and solaced her daughter, assuring her that she would receive no ill-treatment at the hands of Siraj, and her wealth would not be seized, if she only submitted to certain terms. Ghasiti expressed her willingness to accept Siraj's proposal,

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provided, her officer Nazir Ali was allowed to depart from Bengal with a safe passport. The Nawab agreed, and issued orders to send Nazir Ali out of Bengal under escort.

Nazir eventually left Bengal and it was rumoured that he attempted to collect an army at Delhi to help Ghasiti. Ghasiti was prevailed upon to disband her troops, and return to the city, but on her arrival, she was immediately made a prisoner, her castle and all her wealth were seized and confiscated to the state. But Siraj pardoned the officers and soldiers who had fought on her behalf.

On her release, Ghasiti joined Mir Jafar, Jagat Set and Raj Ballav in a conspiracy against Siraj and gave them much assistance by winning over others to their party. To do this, she used to send secret messages, telling them how she had been disrobed of her rank and honour, and stripped of her wealth, recalling to their minds all the favours they had received from her family and recapitulating the sufferings she had gone through, and exhorting them to rise against Siraj. She now took out of the hiding place the gold she had concealed there, and used

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it in furtherance of the conspiracy. She sent a portion of it to Mir Jafar. The conspirators persuaded the English to join them. At this time, the English were digging out a trench around Calcutta and fortifying the place. They also harboured Raj Ballav's son Kissendas, who came to Calcutta with a fortune, which belonged partly to his father and partly to Ghasiti. These are two of the most important causes which led to the quarrel between the English and Siraj.

We here narrate Mr. Holwell's description of Ghasiti's death from his letter to Mr. Warren Hastings. *

After the battle of Plassey, Ghasiti and Amina were sent as prisoners to Dacca. Mir Jafar sent a Jamadar and one hundred horse with orders to Jusarat Khan to put Aliwardi's family to death, with separate orders to the Jamadar in case Jusarat refused to obey. The latter declined

* An Address to the Proprietors of East India Stock, setting forth the unavoidable necessity and real motives for the Revolution in Bengal, in 1760. By J. Z. Holwell, P. 45.

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to take any part in the tragedy and left it to the other, who took the ladies out by night in a boat about two miles above the city, and having tied weights to their legs, threw them over-board. They struggled for some time holding the gunwale of the boat, but the cruel Jamadar struck them on their heads with heavy sticks and finally cut off their hands, whereupon they sank.

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AMINA BEGAM

(MOTHER OF SIRAJ-UD-DAULAH)

Amina was Aliwardi's youngest daughter. She was married to her cousin Zainuddin Ahmad. Immediately after Aliwardi's appointment to the Governorship of Patna, Amina Begam gave birth to a son. The birth of this child appeared to have brought luck to Aliwardi, who adopted him as his son and named him Mirza Muhammad, after himself. This Mirza Muhammad is no other than Siraj-ud-daulah, a prominent figure in the history of Bengal

Amina was generous and tender-hearted. She taught her son to practise virtue. Her compassionate nature led her to release Begam Johnson, even to the detriment of her son's interest. She also helped her mother in securing Mr. Holwell's liberty.

When Siraj was making preparations for a war against the English, Amina advised him to

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desist from the purpose, but Siraj turned a deaf ear to her advice and attacked the English, with the result known to all. *

We have already stated how Amina's eldest sister Ghasiti fell in love with Husain Quli. Some time after, she too became strongly attached to him. In the long run, this illegal and unwarranted love brought down a terrible fate on Husain Quli.

Ghulam Husain in his *Mutaqherin* has distinctly stated how, during Nawab Aliwardi's prosperity, his two daughters and grandson gave themselves up to unbridled license and every kind of debauchery, shocking to morality, and cast a slur on his family, till then unstained.

Amina tried to induce her son to desist from war with the English, not only because she was apprehensive as to the result of the war, but also because it would touch her own interest in another direction. It is said, that the Begams used to speculate in commerce and consequently could not afford to break with the English.

* Translation of a letter from M. Le Conte to M. Courtin at Dacca, dated Chundernagore, 19th June, 1756. Hill's *Bengal, Indian Records Series :* Vol. 1, P. 20.

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Amir Chund was a particular favourite of Siraj. Once a consignment of his opium and saltpetre was being conveyed in a boat belonging to Amina Begam, along with the Begam's opium. On its way to Hughly, Amir Chund, with the permission of Siraj, transhipped his cargo to his own boat with a view to send it to its destination before the Begam's goods in order to command a good market. Amina, having come to know of this, was very angry, as her goods would not sell at all. She drew her father's attention to the fact, but could do nothing. *

Zainuddin Ahmad, during his stay at Murshidabad, found Nawazish and Saiyyad Ahmad to be immensely rich, and fearing that they might cause trouble in future with their wealth, tried to win over to his side Shamshir, Sardar and other Afghan chiefs. He proposed to the Nawab that these Afghan chiefs might be incorporated in an army of 3000 soldiers and be stationed in Behar. The Nawab was at first simply surprised, but had to accede to his overtures. Zainuddin

* Letter from Dr. Forth to Mr. Drake at Fulta, dated Chinsurah, 16th December, 1756. Hill's *Bengal, I. R. S.* Vol. II. P. 63-64.

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was presiding over the Durbar and was himself distributing betel amongst the Afghan chiefs as a token of special favour, when one of them stabbed him with a knife. Before Zainuddin could unsheathe his sword, his head fell to the ground. The Afghans surrounded the palace and the durbar, and mercilessly murdered Haji Ahmad, the treasurer. * Although a terrible scene of confusion and dismay followed Zainuddin's death, Amina Begam had the presence of mind to order the gates of the zenana to be shut. The Afghans carried every obstacle before them and all the wealth of Zainuddin fell into their hands. They also took away Amina and other Begams by force in an open cart to the camp of Shamshir. We have already narrated how Aliwardi defeated the Afghans and rescued Amina.

Readers of history know well how Miran brought about Siraj's death. His mangled body was placed on an elephant and was exposed in the streets of Murshidabad. When the elephant

* It is said that Amina, out of pity, herself poisoned her father-in-law, Haji Ahmad, and thereby put an end to his sufferings. (*Orme*)

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at last arrived at the gate of Amina's residence, the heart-rending scene that ensued, cannot be adequately described. Amina who had not been aware of her son's death before, now for the first time came to know of it, and ran up to the elephant. She had the dead body taken down and repeatedly kissed the face of the corpse. The Begam, whose feet had never before touched the soil of the street, now, ran after the elephant, bereft of her senses. Khadim Hasan Khan witnessed this scene from the terrace of his house and forgetting all the benefit he had received at the hands of Siraj's father, and showing no sympathy for the tenderness of the mother, sent a number of servants to the place of occurence, who by blows and rude violence forced her back to her abode.

Mir Jafar sent Ghasiti and Amina from Murshidabad to Dacca, as prisoners, where they were kept under strict confinement. Having conceived some suspicion of the two Begams, Miran ordered them to be conveyed in a boat to the middle of the river and to be thrown overboard, after deluding the Begams with the idea that they were being sent to Murshidabad. When Amina and Ghasiti were taken to the appointed place, they

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were informed of the true cause of their being conveyed thither.

Ghasiti took fright and shed tears, but Amina turning towards her sister, endeavoured to console her. "Sister", she said, "as we have been great sinners ourselves, we ought to thank God, that we are offered this method of expiation, and that our blood will be on Miran's head."

The Begams after bathing and putting on clean clothes, cursed Miran, saying—"O God Almighty, we are both sinners and culprits, but we have done no harm to Miran. On the contrary, he owes us everything in the world, nor have we had any other return from him than this unjust order for putting us to death. We hope, therefore, that after our death Thou wouldst send Thine lightning to crush his guilty head, and to exact from him a full revenge on our own account and that of our children." * After these words, they joined their hands together and jumped overboard.

Their last prayer was heard. It is said, that on the very night of this occurrence, a thunderbolt descended and struck Miran dead.

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* *Elliot*—Vol. VIII, P. 429.

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LUTF-UN-NISSA BEGAM

(WIFE OF NAWAB SIRAJ-UD-DAULAH)

Readers of Indian history are familiar with the incidents of the life of the unfortunate Siraj-ud-daulah, the last independent Nawab of Bengal, but very little is known about his favourite Begam, Lutf-un-nissa.

There is a difference of opinion among the historians as to the nature of Lutf-un-nissa's relation with Siraj. First, we see that Siraj was to have been married to Iraj Khan's daughter, but no detailed account of her life can be found in contemporary history or even in the Nizamat Records. According to Mr. Beveridge, Lutf-un-nissa was originally a Hindu and none other than Faizy, Mohan Lall's sister ; but Mustafa, in his *Mutaqherin* says that Lutf-un-nissa must not be confounded with Faizy or Faizen, another favourite of Siraj. Several historians, however, have distinctly mentioned Lutf-un-nissa as the wife of Siraj.

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Lutf-un-nissa did not come of a noble family. She made her entry into the seraglio of Nawab Aliwardi as a slave-girl. The Nawab's favourite grandson Siraj was charmed with her youthful beauty and mental accomplishments, and fell deeply in love with her. Lutf-un-nissa was not an adventuress, but a virtuous woman, loving and tender. She loved Siraj in spite of all his vices and was always faithful to him. She was her husband's partner in prosperity and a companion in his adversity. The anecdotes hereafter narrated will illustrate this.

1754-55 Siraj was incited by his evil associates against Raja Janakiram and resolved to subvert the Raja's power and bring Behar under his own sway, as he himself was originally appointed the ruler of Behar by Nawab Aliwardi, his grandfather. Siraj set out for Patna accompanied only by Lutf-un-nissa and her mother. On his way he was joined by a few followers. Siraj then sent a message to Janakiram demanding that the fort should be surrendered to him. Janakiram refused to do so, whereupon Siraj attacked the fort, but was repulsed and ultimately defeated by the Raja's well-disciplined soldiers.

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After the rout, Siraj and Lutf-un-nissa took refuge in a cottage just outside the town. Janakiram hastened to the spot, invited them to the fort and treated them with due respect and dignity. News very soon reached Aliwardi, who, in hot haste, came down to Patna. The old Nawab was so overcome by Siraj's humiliation, that he kissed him and forgave him for his youthful folly.

When in 1756 a quarrel broke out between Siraj and the English merchants, Mr. Watts, Manager of the English Factory at Cossimbazar, with his wife and children, fell into the hands of the Nawab. Their life and safety mainly depended on the kindness of Amina Begam, Siraj's mother, who allowed them to remain concealed in her own apartments for 37 days. In the meantime, Amina requested Lutf-un-nissa to procure their liberty. Lutf-un-nissa took compassion on them and at the risk of her husband's displeasure interceded on their behalf. At first Siraj was inexorable, but ultimately yielded to her tearful entreaties and released them. *

When the battle of Plassey was over, Siraj

* H. B. Hyde's *Parochial Annals of Bengal*, P. 58.

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found himself deserted by his faithless associates and at once hastened to his father-in law Iraj Khan, but the latter refused to stand by him in his adversity. At last Siraj resolved to escape. When he was about to set out, Lutf-un-nissa fell at his feet and begged him to let her accompany him. Siraj tried to explain to her that his flight was merely temporary and that he meant to come back very soon with a strong force to recover his kingdom, but Lutf-un-nissa could not be persuaded to desist from her purpose.

At dead of night, Siraj accompanied by Lutf-un-nissa, her young daughter and a few faithful old servants, started towards Bhagwangola. The morning came and the heat of the day gradually became intense. Lutf-un-nissa took every care to mitigate the exhaustion of her husband, and fanned him continually with her handkerchief. Having reached Bhagwangola, Siraj made up his mind to go towards the North. After crossing the Padma and the Mahananda, when his boat reached Burral, a village four miles off from Rajmahal, on the other side of the river, his further advance was checked by the shallowness of the river at its mouth near Najerpur.

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After three days and three nights of continual suffering for want of food, Siraj sought refuge in the cottage of a mendicant named Dana Shah, who it is said, bore grudge and hatred against Siraj for persecution on a former occasion, and thought this was a capital opportunity for wreaking his vengeance on his enemy. He surreptitiously informed Mir Qasim, the then Foujdar of Rajmahal, about his whereabouts. Mir Qasim immediately captured Siraj and sent him to Murshidabad as a prisoner. Lutf-un-nissa was also made a captive by Mir Qasim, who after depriving her of all her valuables exiled her to Dacca.

Readers are well acquainted with what happened to Siraj on his arrival at Murshidabad. He was foully murdered by Muhammad Beg at Miran's instigation. After Siraj's death, Lutf-un-nissa was persecuted with several proposals of marriage to which, on one occasion, her reply was that a person accustomed to ride an elephant, could not stoop to ride a donkey.*

After the lapse of a few years, Lutf-un-nissa came back to Murshidabad through the courtesy and kindness of the English, who granted a

* *Muzaffar Nama—P.* 106.

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monthly stipend of Rs. 1000 for her maintenance and a further sum of Rs. 305 per month for looking after the cemeteries of Nawab Aliwardi and her husband. She never made any improper use of this money, and applying only as much out of it as was absolutely necessary for her own bare support, spent the remainder in charity.

How long Lutf-un-nissa lived after this cannot be ascertained. Firstly, we find that Mr. Forster in his letter, dated 31st August, 1782, has recorded the fact that even then Lutf-un-nissa used to frequent the mausoleum of her husband to mourn over his death *; this goes to prove that she was alive for at least 25 years after the death of her husband.

Secondly, Mustafa, the translator of the *Sayar-ul-Mutaqherin*, found her living in Murshidabad † 32 years after Siraj's death. Lastly, Mr. Beveridge found mention of a lady, named Umdat-un-nissa in the Nizamat Records, whom he took

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* *Journey from Bengal to England.* Geo. Forster, Vol. I. Page 12.

† "This lady (Lutf-un-nissa) is now (1789) living at Murshidabad." *Mutaqherin*, Vol. II, P. 94, Note,

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for Lutf-un-nissa. * This Umdat-un-nissa, in the month of August, 1791, sent a memorial to the Government, praying for an increase of her stipend. If Mr. Beveridge's supposition be true, we might infer that Lutf-un-nissa's death did not occur until 37 years after Siraj's death. Mr. Holwell on the other hand says that Lutf-un-nissa and her young daughter were drowned along with Ghasiti and other Begams. †

Lutf-un-nissa used to strew flowers on the grave of her husband, in the Khushbag—a garden situated on the western bank of the Bhagirathi. ‡ It is said that she breathed her last while in the

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* "It would be interesting to know whether this lady was the same as Umdat-un-nissa Begam, who is described in the Nizamat Records as the widow of Siraj. If so, she did not die till 5 Rabi-us-Sani 1208, i.e. 10th November, 1794." H. Beveridge, *Calcutta Review*, 1892, P. 204.

† *An Address to the Proprietors of East India Stock etc.* P. 47.

‡ "Hated and despised by his subjects and foreigners alike, he (Siraj) left one faithful mourner in his wife, Lutf-un-nissa, who for many years employed mullahs to say prayers at his tomb which she used frequently to visit.

Hill's *Bengal : Indian Records Series* : Vol. I, P. CCVIII.

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act of worshipping the grave of her husband. After death, she was interred close to his grave.

The ruthless hand of time has demolished everything, except Khushbag, which is still extant and proclaims the unshaken fidelity of Lutf-unnissa to her husband.

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RABIAH BEGAM

(DAUGHTER OF HAJI AHMAD)

Rabiah Begam, a niece of Nawab Aliwardi, was consort to Ata-ullah Khan, a relation of Shuja Khan, once the Viceroy of Bengal.

She had three daughters, one of whom was betrothed to Siraj, but died before her marriage. This bereavement sorely affected Rabiah.

In 1750 (1159H.) Aliwardi celebrated the nuptials of his favourite grandson Siraj-ud-daulah. At the same time he also married another of his grandsons, Akram-ud-daulah, to the second daughter of Ata-ullah Khan to console and oblige Rabiah Begam.

Ata-ullah, a brave man and efficient general, was deputed by Aliwardi to go to the assistance of Mir Jafar in the campaign against the Mahrattas. In the battle which followed, Ata-ullah distinguished himself greatly. Elated with the success he had achieved against the Mahrattas and being of an intriguing turn of mind, he associated himself with Mir Jafar in his project to entrap and kill Aliwardi and divide the Nawab's

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kingdom between themselves. The plot was found out and Ata-ullah was banished from the country. He, with all his riches and moveables crossed the Ganges and took up his quarters at Malda. Rabiah Begam followed her husband's fortunes and faced adversity calmly and cheerfully. She accompanied her husband as far as Lucknow. But within a short time, Ata-ullah, who had obtained a post under Nawal Ray, the deputy governor of Kanauj, was slain by the side of his master in a battle against Ahmad-Khan Bangash.

Rabiah Begam was thus left to her own resources in a very dangerous country. But she won over the grandees and zamindars of Lucknow by distributing rich presents among them. Shortly afterwards she found means to effect a retreat with all her riches, furniture and family. She at first went to Patna and then to Murshidabad where she took up her residence under the protection of her uncle Aliwardi.

Rabiah was with Ghasiti during the famous siege of the Motijheel. But she escaped the calamity which overtook Ghasiti through the intervention of her daughter, the widow of Akram-ud-daulah.

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In the year 1780 (1189H.) Rabiah Begam died. Notorious for her vices, as she was, she had many good qualities too. Long before her death she repented of her past life and invoking the divine forgiveness she breathed her last. The fine words she uttered on her death-bed, go a great way to prove her firm faith in her religion. Her last prayer was—"Oh Lord! should you punish me for my misdeeds, you have that right. I am your bond-woman and culprit, but should you forgive me, it would not be inconsistent, for you are the Most Merciful of the merciful."

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MUNNY BEGAM.

(BEGAM OF NAWAB MIR JAFAR).

Munny Begam did not come of a noble family. She was a dancing girl in her early youth. Her mother, a poor widow, of Balkunda in Sikandrabad, being in sore distress and unable to maintain her daughter, made her over to one Bishu. Bishu took Munny, and her own daughter Babboo to Delhi, where both girls were taught the art of dancing. At this time the marriage of Siraj was celebrated with great pomp, and Bishu and her party including Munny and Babboo were invited to Murshidabad to perform on the occasion.

After the festivities were over, Mir Jafar, being charmed with Munny's dancing, asked the party to stay on at Murshidabad for some time. He paid her daily visits and became so much infatuated with her that he asked her to extend her sojourn for some time more, promising to pay her Rs. 500 per month, as salary. Munny

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agreed. Afterwards, Mīr Jafar married her. Later on he also married Babboo.

Munny Bibi came to be known as Munny Begam from this time and had to part with her early companions. Thus, for love the dancing girl had to give up her profession and freedom. She had two sons Najm-ud-daulah and Saif-ud-daulah, and Babboo Begam had one son Mobarak-ud-daulah. Afterwards her mental qualifications and heartfelt love raised her to the position of the foremost Begam of Mir Jafar's harem. She came to be the mistress of all the wealth Mir Jafar carried away from Siraj's Hirajheel palace.

On Mir Jafar's death, his son Najm-ud-daulah was placed on the masnad. The claim of Miran's minor son was disallowed by the English.

Najm-ud-daulah and his mother Munny Begam had a mind to get Nund Coomar appointed as diwan, but the members of the Calcutta Council disliked Nund Coomar and vetoed the proposal. At last Reza Khan obtained the post at the cost of an enormous bribe. In 1766 Najm-ud-daulah died of fever.

On Najm-ud-daulah's death, his sixteen year old brother Saif-ud-daulah succeeded him, and as

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he was a minor, the administration of the country was placed in Munny Begam's hands. In 1770 the young Nawab died of small-pox.

Babboo Begam's son Mobarak was now appointed Nawab. He was then only twelve years of age. In 1772 Warren Hastings came to India as Governor of Bengal and finding the income of the State not sufficient,brought about an innovation in the administration of the country. He established a secret Committee to supervise the affairs of the Government. At Nund Coomar's instigation the Committee wrote to Resident Middleton asking him to imprison Reza Khan, who they thought was the root of all evils. Reza was afterwards brought to Calcutta. Although Reza had been for some time helping Babboo Begam against Munny Begam and trying to undermine her interest, she was sorely grieved at Reza's distress and out of charity did everything in her power to procure his release.

After Reza's disgrace,she was appointed tutoress and guardian to the minor Nawab. Munny Begam influenced the Council to confer the title of 'Raja' on Nund Coomar's son Gurudas, and to appoint him to the post of diwan and chief accountant

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No satisfactory explanation can be given as to why the Nawab's stepmother Munny Begam was appointed guardian in preference to Babboo Begam, and why Babboo Begam's application for guardianship was thrown out by the Governor.

The reasons for appointing Munny Begam are, however, thus stated by the majority of the Council in their Minute of 11th July, 1772 :—

> "We know no person so fit for the trust of guardian to the Nawab as the widow of Late Nabob Jafar Ali Cawn, Munnee Begam. Her rank may give her a claim to this pre-eminence without hazard to our own policy..... The Diwan will act of course in all cases in which she cannot personally appear. Great abilities are not to be expected in a zenana, but in this she is very far from being deficient, nor is any extraordinary reach of understanding requisite for so limited an employ."

For facility of work Munny Begam took Etbar Ali Khan, a eunuch, as an assistant to Raja Gurudas, and Etbar became the *de facto* Naib. He was both a fool and a knave. Being exceedingly proud of his position, he offered insults to many a notable man of the time and thus created

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much heartburning and dissatisfaction throughout the country. On his advice, Munny Begam deprived Babboo and Mobarak of all their power. Her favouritism towards this foolish and inexperienced officer was severely criticised at the time.

Governor General Hastings reduced Mobarak's allowance from 24 to 16 lacs. Munny Begam was entrusted with the disposal of this money during his minority and the money was spent :—

a. Towards the luxury of the Nawab

b. To all the expenses of the Nawab's family and for military purposes

c. A part of it was paid to Mir Jafar's relations and his concubines as allowance

d. A moiety was paid as an allowance to Aliwardi's successors

e. There was another item of allowance paid to the favourites of the predecessors of Mobarak

After a protracted trial for two years, Reza was released. When he regained the power he had lost, Munny Begam was dismissed with an allowance of one lac of rupees a year. Raja Gurudas's services also were dispensed with. But before long the aspect of political affairs changed. Warren

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Hastings again removed Reza Khan from his office on the pretext that the Nawab was competent to manage his own affairs and that he had written a letter charging Reza Khan with cruelty and misconduct. But the Court of Directors insisted upon Reza Khan's restitution on the ground that the Nawab had lacked capacity to look after the State. Warren Hastings long resisted this order and supported Munny Begam and the Nawab. At last he had to give in. In 1793 Mobarak died.

After his death, on 24th September, 1793 his eldest son Babar Ali was given the Nizamat of Bengal. At the time of Munny Begam's dismissal a statement of accounts was called for, and a commission presided over by Mr. Goring sent to Murshidabad for enquiry. On investigation a large deficit was found. Munny Begam explained that the amount had been spent for the satisfaction of Governor General Hastings and his officials.

She was much respected by the East India Company. When, in January, 1713 she died, in honour of her, guns were fired of the same number as the years she had lived. She was interred in the Jafargunge cemetery.

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Once she got the present of a planqueen with 30 bearers and a plot of land for the maintenance of the men from Rani Bhowani. This plot of land forms a part of the Nizamat. She used to get a stipend of Rs. 12,000 per month. The Chawck Masjid of Murshidabad stands as a monument of her fame. It was erected in 1767.

Munny Begam was a woman of great intelligence and spirit, but was haughty and overbearing. At that time there was not a single person in Bengal who could excel her in benevolence except Rani Bhowani. For her kindness she was termed "Mother-O'-Company", i. e. the mother of the Company. She raised Etbar Ali Khan from the lowest depth of distress to affluence and power.

She, as Gudinashin Begam (principal Begam of the Nawab's harem), used to get more than a lac of rupees a year, which she spent in good works.

Once a maid-servant in her employ was in great distress being unable to give her daughter away in marriage for want of money. On hearing this, Munny Begam immediately sent her 70 or 80 gold mohurs and other necessary things. Ghulam Husain has fully described this incident in his

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Mutaqherin. He himself was present in Murshidabad when the marriage took place.

How a woman born and bred in poverty could raise herself to such a position, by sheer intelligence and beauty, is well illustrated in the life of Mir Jafar's wife Munny Begam.

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OPINION.

I have carefully gone through Babu Brajendranath Banerji's **Begams of Bengal** *in Ms. The author's industry is commendable. He has consulted nearly all the authorities available in print in the English language, and has shown the historical sense by discriminating between different sources of information. His scrupulous regard for accuracy is evidenced by the exact references that he gives in his footnotes and by his relentless rejection of romantic legends which would have made excellent "copy."*

We may dissent from the author's views of the character and historic importance of the women whose lives he has studied here, but there cannot be two opinions as to his honesty of workmanship and regard for accuracy. The historical method which this young man has taught himself and the discipline of patient work in the midst of scanty leisure and lack of library facilities which he has undergone in writing this his maiden work, lead us to hope that given a loftier theme, he would produce a work of first-rate importance and abiding interest.

JADUNATH SARKAR, M. A.,
Professor, Patna College,
22nd, April, 1915.

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